

A SIGN OF IDENTITY

NOWADAYS, CATALAN GRAPHIC DESIGN IS A VALID EXPONENT OF THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ADVANCES OF A COUNTRY WHICH, IN ITS DESIRE FOR MODERNIZATION, IS WORKING TOWARDS ITS INTEGRATION IN THE MOST ADVANCED SOCIETIES OF OUR WORLD.

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To call Catalonia the centre and cradle of the development of design in Spain is not to adopt a romantic or chauvinist attitude; it is fully justified by historical facts which are one with the reality and the character of our people.

It may be worth pointing out that the first strictly nationalist design –the four stripes which identify our country– was created at a time of expansion and consolidation of the identity of the Catalan people in the politics of the tenth century, when Guifré el Pelós, wounded in the battle against the Normans, asked Carles el Calb to emblazon his shield, whereupon the latter, soaking his hand in the blood from the wound, drew the four stripes on a yellow leather shield with his own fingers. Even if it is not strictly-speaking certain how our national sign came into being, we like to think it was in this way.

What we can definitely and objectively be sure of is the fact that in 1775 the dynamic cultural and financial situation of Catalonia led to the creation, under the auspices of the *Real Junta*

Particular de Comercio de Barcelona, of the first school of design, called *Escuela Gratuita de Diseño*, to encourage the study of techniques involved in artwork on printed fabric, necessary for the development of the incipient exportation of textiles abroad.

However, so far as graphic design is concerned, the first contribution of a quantitative and qualitative importance took place in our country, as in the rest of Europe, during the period known as the Industrial Revolution, when many prestigious artists took up the task and supplied work in the mainstream of the cultural and artistic avant-garde trends of the time. It was in this period that what today we consider the historical basis of this profession was established. *Modernism* was, in Catalonia, the movement which received the influence of French *Art Nouveau*, English *Modern Style* and Italian and Austrian *Liberty and Sezession*, all more or less equivalent art movements. This was the style that dominated the plastic element of the first publicity posters in Catalonia. Ramón Casas with his famous poster

for 'Anís del Mono', Alexandre de Riquer, Gaspar Camps, Santiago Rusiñol, Joan Llaverias and many others set a good example when they established poster-art as a vehicle for the most advanced artistic trends.

But it was *Noucentisme*, the movement that followed *Modernism* in the first decade of this century, that tried to find a language of its own, that of a people who felt the urge to find its roots, and who, searching the shores of the Mediterranean, came upon its earliest and most legitimate precursors; the shaping elements of a popular reality.

For Catalonia, apart from the rediscovery of neo-classical aesthetics, *Noucentisme* represented the definition of a particular people's way of life, the sentiment of a way of understanding life and relationships and the love of one's own land. 'The love of a thing well done', preached by Eugeni d'Ors, the leading theoretician of the movement, was reflected in the care with which design was treated in all its different applications, from the large, forceful poster to the smallest publication. Out of this pe-

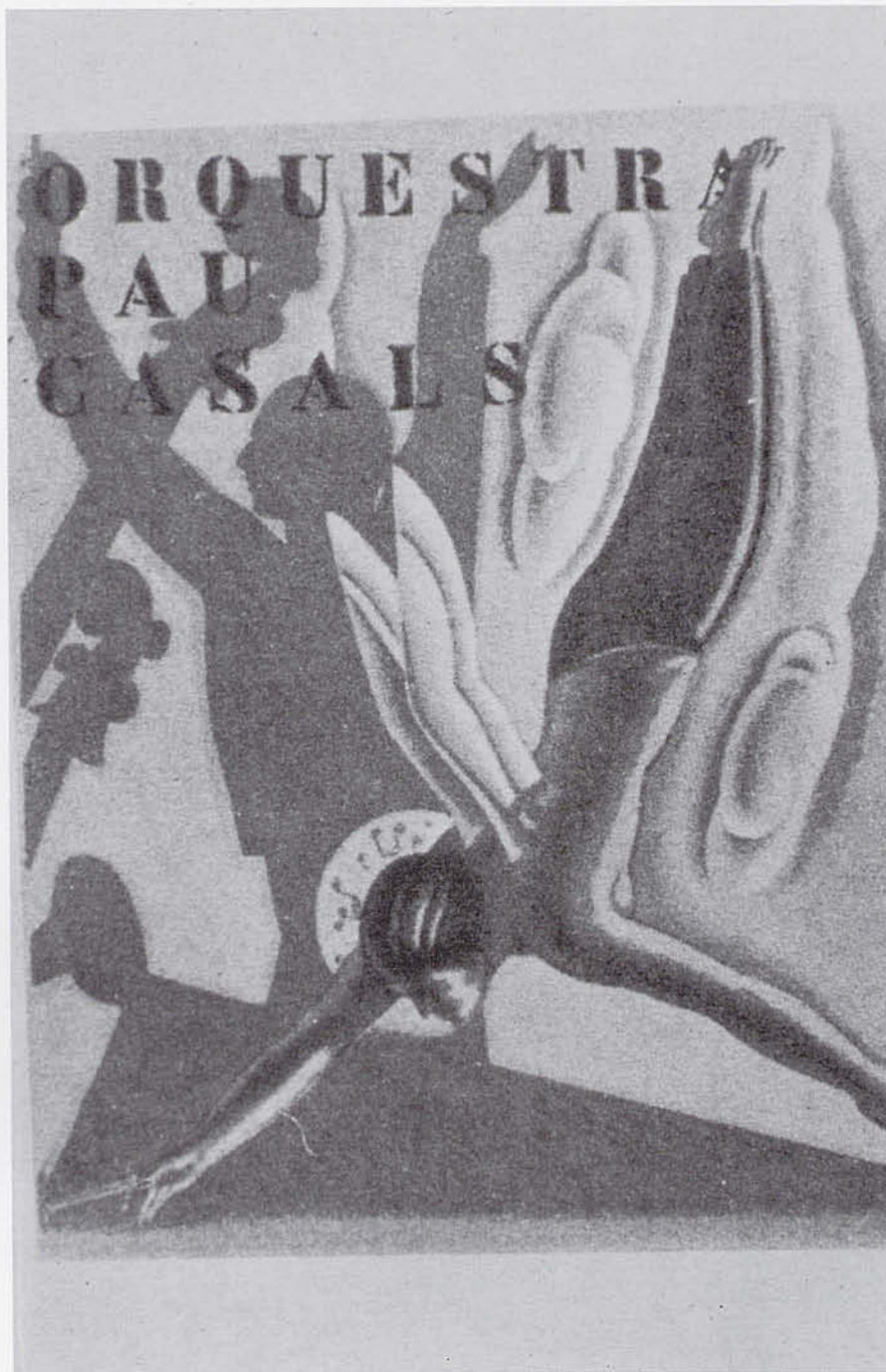


riod we must mention especially the works of Xavier Nogués, Josep Obiols, Ricard Opisso, Francesc d'Alexandre Galí, etc.

The European avant-gardes that emerged between the First and Second world wars also had an immediate effect on the world of graphic design in Catalonia. Perhaps the most noticeable influence came from cubism, which gave rise to the movement known as *art déco*, the predominant style at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, held in Paris in 1925. This language was rapidly absorbed by the bourgeoisie and soon invaded the popular levels of our society. Advertisements, labels, posters, illustrations and even type-faces were described as "cubist". It was a design that spoke of an opulent and idle society, that held up a dazzling mirror to the economic and social crises caused by the European war.

Another particularly interesting movement was the design-work produced largely by the *Sindicat de Dibuixants* in their posters during the Spanish Civil





War (1936-1939), which exhibit a lively graphic language, not unlike the plastic experiences which emerged from the Soviet revolution of 1917.

Nevertheless, graphic design as a communicative discipline arrived in Catalonia after the post-war period and at a time of some social and economic development. It was in the sixties when the first school of design was opened in Catalonia and the first designers' association of the entire Spanish state –the

ADGFAD– was founded. 1964 saw the institution of the *LAUS* prizes for the most original and successful works of graphic design and visual communication produced each year. Since then, new schools and different associations related to the world of design have emerged, irreversibly shaping the flourishing Catalan design.

The political change in 1975, when democracy was established, represented a refreshing impulse in the use of graphic

design, which catered for the social and cultural needs that this new political configuration brought about.

Nowadays, Catalan graphic design is a valid exponent of the social and cultural advances of a country which, in its desire for modernization, is working towards its integration in the most advanced societies of our world. Graphic design continues to be the chronicler of the cultural identity of our people. ■